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Historical vignette

Behçet

Behçet's syndrome is a recurrent condition which was originally described as a combination of oral and genital ulcers and various types of ocular inflammation. Several occasional features were added subsequently, including skin rashes, arthritis, thrombophlebitis, and neurological manifestations. The syndrome is rare but has attracted a great deal of interest. Behçet himself is much less well known.

Hûlusi Behçet was born in Istanbul in 1889. At this time there were several military medical schools which had originally been founded for the training of army surgeons, and Behçet graduated from one of these, at Gülhane, in 1910. He was appointed as a resident in the dermatology and syphilis clinic at Gülhane Army Hospital, where he remained for four years. On the outbreak of the first world war he moved to Eskişehir Army Hospital, near Ankara, where he became assistant director and practised as a dermatologist. When the war ended in 1918 he undertook postgraduate training, first in Budapest and then at the Charité Hospital in Berlin. On his return to Turkey he worked as a dermatologist and syphilologist at various hospitals, and in 1933 was appointed professor and clinical director of the Department of Dermatology and Syphilology at the University of Istanbul Faculty of Medicine, where he remained for the rest of his life.

Behçet was well known in Turkey and eastern Europe. In his own country he edited its only major dermatology journal for many years, and he was a regular correspondent to two weekly medical journals in Germany. He published many scientific papers on diseases of the skin, and wrote a large book on syphilis. He summarised his original account of the disease which now bears his name as follows:

> I am presenting three patients whom I have seen respectively 21, seven and three years ago. Each had been affected by recurrent aphthous lesions of the mouth and genitals, and by ocular inflammation—conjunctivitis, hypopyon, iritis and episcleritis. Our research suggests the possibility of a viral cause for this disease. Examination of the patients' teeth showed that these were in a bad state, which led us to believe that they might be a source of the infection.

These patients were first described in a Turkish journal in 1936, and again in the following year in Behçet's best known paper in the German *Dermatologische Wochenschrift.* At first, only a few of his colleagues accepted the syndrome as a disease entity; most thought the patients had aphthous stomatitis, erythema multiforme, Reiter's or Steven-Johnson syndromes. But later, other cases were reported and it was realised that Behçet had been right in describing this as a new disease entity; in due course other components were identified. Its cause remains unknown to this day. Behçet himself had suggested a viral aetiology, and in recent times it has been proposed that herpes simplex virus may be involved in some way, perhaps by inducing a deficit in immunoregulation, but this is uncertain.

Behçet seems to have been a rather sad and lonely person. His mother died when he was a child, and he had few close friends. His health was indifferent, and he was a heavy smoker. He spoke good French and German, enjoyed literature and art and read a lot. He had one child, a daughter to whom he was devoted, but his marriage ended in divorce in 1941. Thereafter, he lived and worked in his office, and in 1948 he died of a heart attack; he was 59 years old, and had been one of the best known Turkish physicians of his day. A posthumous award for scientific achievement was given in 1975, and in 1980 his portrait appeared on some Turkish postage stamps. But his lasting fame lies in the disease he described and in the massive literature which it still attracts.

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